

Penn's Ham Radio Helps After Flood

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Over in the corner of the room, David Dodell's ham radio set crackled to life.

On the other end was a strained voice transmitting from the flood-ravaged area of Johnstown, Pa.

After identifying himself, the caller said he had a "message to relay" to a resident's relative living in New England.

"Everyone is fine on father's side," the message read. "Dick lost his home, but is being taken care of."

End of message.

Later, Dodell, 20, a senior at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of Penn's amateur ham radio club, used his set to contact another operator in New England.

Using a home telephone number attached to the Johnstown message, this ham operator would deliver the brief message to the flood victim's concerned relative.

"Sometimes I don't get to bed until well after midnight. But I know there are other people who will sleep better at night once they know their relatives living in the Johnstown area are okay," said Dodell.

Since last Thursday — the day after a flood ripped through the Johnstown area in southwestern Pennsylvania, killing at least 60 persons, making 10,000 others homeless and causing a power failure — Dodell has joined in a volunteer effort with other licensed ham radio operators around the country to assist in a communications network.

Using the university's ham radio facilities on the Penn campus, Dodell said he and other students have handled more than 100 messages from the Johnstown area.

As "network control" operators for

dents' responsibility to contact other licensed ham operators, who then relay the Johnstown messages to the correct parties.

"This is a tragedy, but it's fantastic how everybody is pitching in to aid the victims," said Dodell, who majors in electrical engineering at Penn.

Most of the 50 Penn students belonging to the radio club are away from campus for the summer, said Dodell, a native of Long Island, N.Y.

When he hasn't been standing by his radio set or sleeping, Dodell has been attending summer classes at the university.

Messages transmitted to him from the Johnstown area, he said, have been relayed via ham operators to relatives living all across the United States and to persons in Mexico and Germany.

A main reason Dodell was chosen to act as a "network control" station in the emergency is because his radio operates on 2,000 watts, the maximum allowed by the Federal Communications Commission, which licenses ham operators.

The average power wattage is 200, said Dodell.

"As a teen-ager," said Dodell, "I used to listen to overseas broadcasts on my shortwave radio receiver. I could listen but I couldn't talk back. So I decided to get a ham radio set."

Last Sunday morning, during the height of ham radio transmissions from Johnstown, the Penn station had to be closed down for six hours after it was discovered that someone had broken into the equipment room sometime Saturday night and stolen the head sets.

The club bought new head sets and resumed operations, Dodell said.

"Someone must have heard us broadcasting in the emergency," said